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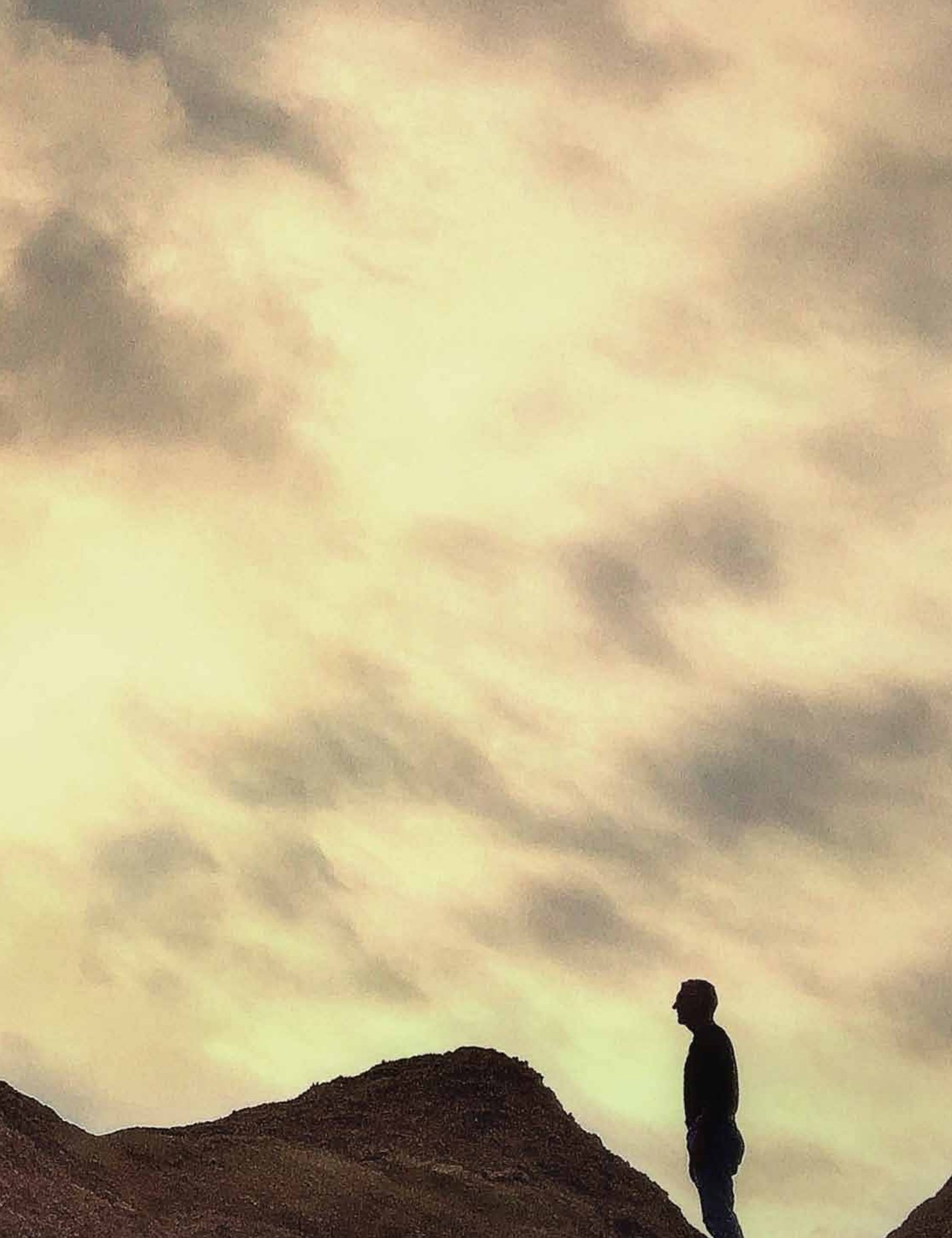
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**34THPARALLEL MAGAZINE PARIS, FRANCE
ISSUE 62 MARCH 2019 34THPARALLEL.NET**



IMAGE BY CHLOE SIMPSON









CARYVILLE, TN BY WA REED

Let's assume for a moment

you're barreling through Caryville, Tennessee

when you spot a sushi bar along Highway 116

to be precise, situated right next door to The Liquor Barn

showcasing Climax moonshine, bathtub gin, & The White Dog.

Now picture this documented in an aging photo album

the images, originally captured in color with a Polaroid

but over time faded to a sort of opaque-ish patina

one image showing families gathered there, and another

your reflection in the blue-black plate-glass.

IMAGES BY VICKI REED VICKIREED.COM



WA REED

In the late 1800s my great-grandfather wrote poetry in the north woods of Maine, years later his son in the trenches of World War I. Today my wife Vicki Reed and I feel fortunate to find ourselves surrounded by creative people and to share a studio where we often collaborate on writing and publishing projects.

Because I'm always on the lookout, always open to new ideas, new approaches, my subject matter tends to be drawn from everyday life. If in a social setting someone asks, Did I tell you about Bill and the Yellow Pages? I hear Bill and the Yellow Pages as the title of a short story. So I tuck it away, confident that sooner or later a storyline will emerge. If they say, So Lorraine decides she wants to make her own shoes, I hear it as a first line. Caryville, TN was written on a road trip with Vicki through Kentucky and Tennessee occasionally stopping to taste interesting bourbons and the local cuisine.

My poetry and short fiction has been published in small press literary arts magazines and literary journals, most recently Zone 3 and The Main Street Rag. I've published several chapbooks of poetry including Still Waters (with photographer Vicki Reed), Text & Texture (with visual artists Deb Mortl, Claudette Lee, and Vicki Reed) and Collected Poems: 1990-2009.

Mouth wide open,
eyes shut tight.



IMAGE BY WENNIEL LUN

Struck a pose next to her, draped his arm across her shoulder, “We reflect well together.”

CURT
BY ELLEN BLOOMENSTEIN

They had walked past the Noho Star restaurant and stopped to stare through the glass window of the Art Nouveau Furniture store at the corner. Daphne in a swingy blue coat, arms swinging out by her hips. Curt, an open tan trenchcoat, hands wedged deep in his trouser pockets, hands sweating, face taut.

Daphne had pointed out the red Victor Horta chair with the walnut curlicued arms. She had crouched down to get a better look at a small photo propped up against the chair legs, the face of a woman who almost resembled Ingrid Bergman, “Think it’s a Helmut Newton?”

Curt had looked away, seemed to fix on some unknown object in the distance, cleared his throat, gazed clear into the glass. “Have you noticed,” he took a breath, “Have you noticed how our reflections are complementary?” He had leaned against the side of the building next to the store window. Struck a pose next to her, draped his arm across her shoulder, “We reflect well together.”

Really, it was an evening like any other New York evening. Then when thunder cracked the lightning which followed took place in a countdown of no more (no less) than a total of five. A burst of water came rushing down in a roar forming what looked like a wall of vertical rivers which, of course, appeared to converge in a torrent of ocean and then—then he had dipped in toward her—and—kissed her. Mouth wide open, eyes shut tight.

They had made a quick dash, ducked into a bar on Great Jones Street. Had sat side by side on the adjoining industrial steel stools studding the counter. Shook off the water from their coats. He had ordered for her: “A gin fizz with a slice of lime.”

“And a cherry,” she had smiled.

He dangled his legs, let each limb hang and every so often kick at and collide with the dark wood and brass rode trimming the underside of the bar.

Curt had smooth pale skin and very straight blond hair cut short at the sides which hung longer in front. An early David Bowie cut. He had navy blue eyes and dark bark lashes and eyebrows. He wore little wire-rimmed oval shaped glasses in silver. He looked boyish in his teal and yellow striped silk tie, a button-down-collar shirt and a slim Ralph Lauren grey gabardine suit.

Daphne wore a short red velveteen Betsey Johnson dress; the sleeves came past her wrists.

She sipped the gin fizz through a green and white striped straw, sucked on the cherry. She crossed her legs and let a black patent leather Ferragamo swing, nearly fall from her foot.

Curt nursed a scotch, head bent, both hands wrapped around the diamond-etched design of the glass. Every so often he looked up, looked around. Pushed his long blond bangs out of his eyes. Let his eyes stop to fix on hers. Daphne blushed, kind of laughed—they both looked fast away.

They couldn't
decide on
which bar
or where to
meet.

They sat like this for about an hour.

This was their first date. They had met two evenings earlier at a mutual friends' dinner party. The hostess, Selina, an old art school friend of Daphne's was now an accountant. She used to paint huge neo-surrealist canvases of things like Botticelli's Venus shopping at the Walmart. Selina had a boyfriend named Tony, an investment banker. Curt, also an investment banker, worked at the same firm as Tony and so he had been invited to this dinner party. Selina promised to do Curt's taxes this year.

Over dinner, from across the table, Curt and Daphne made eye contact. She felt the unusual sensation that they were the only two people at the table—although, in fact, Michael and Katie, a newly married couple and another single woman, Toby, were seated just to their left and right.

Curt asked for Daphne's number as they were leaving. Daphne stood diagonally facing him, fit into the corner of the elevator, a right hand gripped on the gold railing. Curt in front of the plaque displaying all of the floor buttons. The L for Lobby was lit up.

As she had done on half a dozen occasions, Daphne recited the number while Curt tapped it into his phone. He immediately sent her a text: Hello!

Daphne texted back: HI...

He called her the next evening, around seven. He said: "Daphne?" He said, "I'd really like to see you again." He said, "Wil you have a drink with me tomorrow night?"

They couldn't decide on which bar or where to meet; they ended up deciding to meet in front of the Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Soho and decide from there.

The winding walk they took to look for a bar had wound around and around. There were long silences between their sentences. They both were shy. Curt told her about going to Cornell. How he majored in Economics. How he had very few friends. His family: he had one older sister and a mother who taught literature. His parents were divorced, his father a banker. She talked about art school and a few other schools she had gone to along the way; it had taken her over eight years to finish a degree.

The rain was slapping against the big plate glass window of the bar.

Curt pushed away his empty glass, sat up straight. Reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out his phone, found a site and handed it to her. Leaning in near, very close to her, he looked deeply into her hazel-green eyes, sucked in the air then said: "This is the car—the BMW 325i—I will buy. I'm saving so I can buy it."

Daphne flipped her dirty blonde not to mention soaking wet hair from her face. She flipped through the images on Curt's phone, car after car after car—silver and red, green and blue shiny metals, multi-colored aluminum and rubber, glass, leather, iron and steel.

She was soaked. She had a headache, she passed the phone back to him and lowered her head. She held this head in her fine and delicately boned little hands.

Daphne was small and slim with a round but chiseled face—there was a very faint likeness in her looks to Gwyneth Paltrow. Although Daphne was shorter, about five feet two, her hair darker, curly and wavy. And, at 30, she looked about 21. She imagined Curt must also be 30 or so, but she hadn't asked.

Curt said,
“Now that
I’ve met you,
I dream of
you—you in
my car.”

Curt noticed how Daphne’s hands were painted in clear polish and the tips bright white. The night before she had given herself this manicure—penciled in the underside of each nail tip in white just like the nails on some Kardashian she had seen on some website.

There was the sound of guitar, drums, bass; Dolores O’Riordan (may she rest in peace) from the Cranberries sang the 90s tune: You’re so pretty the way you are, you’re so pretty the way you are...

A husky George Clooney-sort wearing a Hawaiian shirt in blinding vacation colors leaned over and ordered a drink: “I’ll have a bourbon—straight.”

The bartender poured out and passed him the drink with a light-pink cocktail napkin. The man passed back a couple of crisp new dollar bills, said, “Pardon me,” to Curt and Daphne and disappeared into the small crowd now gathered in the back; a group huddled for refuge from the rain.

Curt reached over and touched Daphne’s hair, held out a strand in his hand and said, “You know, before I met you, I dreamed of my car.” He twirled that strand of hair—twirled it up and out into the air—a drop of water fell from it.

Curt said, “Now that I’ve met you, I dream of you—you in my car.”

Later, Daphne would sit on a straight-back chair next to a brown tweed couch in Curt’s apartment. The chair, an Ikea copy of something that resembled Gustav Stickley was stained brown with pewter and gold paint decorating the inlaid back and brown leather seat. Her shoes, by now, would be removed and placed on that two feet of linoleum that tiled his front entry.

Curt would make tea in his small strip of kitchen—an L-shaped hall off the main room designed in tasteful shades of stainless steel and black. Dawn Upshaw’s voice would echo off his retro CD player: Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No 3. And Daphne would take in a long breath then clench her teeth and hold her two kneecaps while sitting forward in the space:

Dim. Just the light of two lamps and those three honey-colored beeswax candles Curt had lit, that sat, occasionally spat on the thick braided brown and white trivets on his coffee table. There was a set of bookcases, four shelves of books. A shelf of compact discs neatly stacked in a retro mod back rack. Magazines with titles

like Vanity Fair, The Economist, Forbes. An LG TV. A squat lamp with a brass base and black shade perched on the counter dividing this room from the kitchen. And, a tall iron lamp with a swan neck and smoked glass shade was placed at a precise angle in front of the bookcase. A statuesque figure—as if an intimate relation to the owner was there watching over you. The lamp would make Daphne more than slightly uncomfortable—she would look over at the wall on the left:

Two pictures framed in smoothly brushed silver metal hung next to each other. One, a slim blonde girl in a straw hat standing in front of a white picket fence covered over in tangles of wisteria. How grotesquely Hallmark she would note.

However, at closer inspection the girl in this picture would appear to be crying—no, she would seem more annoyed. A bit irritated. Actually, angry. Definitely on the brink of breaking down that fence and charging out past the wisteria and all.

Daphne would lean forward to read the caption under the image. It would seem to go something like this: See the whole, bless it all. In releasing the past you reclaim your power. Step through the gateway now.

Hadn't she once read that in the Ralph Blum book of runes?

She would lean in even closer. Up close the caption would be completely different. A trite saying out of a fortune cookie: Pardon is the Choicest Flower of Victory.

She would squint, rub both her eyes with the back of her hand. Blink. There would be the clink of two glasses in the kitchen. Curt would mumble out from the distance: "Shit. Damn it. Ah-m-god—'scuse me."

The other framed image, a huge ship set against a stark white background, the masts blowing out in the wind would strike her as something that Turner might be like in black-and-white celluloid shot through a nylon by someone say, like Richard Avedon.

"I'm crazy for nylons," Curt would breathe in to her neck an hour later when they were stretched out horizontally on his couch; her dress pushed up past her chest. His lips pressed to a space between fabric and flesh. Both his legs wound around her waist in a tight, very tight grip. An embrace.

Daphne hadn't had a serious let alone intimate involvement with anyone for four years.

Partially this was by choice, she had had her share of the crazies: the "evil men" as her shrink referred to them.

And quite frankly, the last, Lyle, a kind of quiet-serious-actor-type had ended in such a deafening explosion over something as inane as her wanting the air conditioner on (it was a heatwave in July) and him preferring the heat, that she wasn't sure she'd ever be convinced to try such a relationship again.

Besides, there was always her work.

And besides, in the past she had painted Abstract Expressionist and Minimal pictures on canvas, made silver jewelry, designed paisley textiles and acted using Stanislavski's Method."

She had met Lyle in a class at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts while studying the Method.

Lyle and she
had fallen head
over heels while
playing opposite
each other in a
scene out of *The
Petritified Forest*.

Lyle and she had fallen head over heels while playing opposite each other in a scene out of *The Petrified Forest*.

Daphne, as Gabby (Betty Davis), had suddenly noticed in Lyle, as Squier (Leslie Howard), a certain light take hold in his eyes when he had recited his lines: “Nor cease to serve, but serve more constantly; this is the end for which we twain are met.”

And when Lyle, as Squier, had chomped down into his burger, as the script had directed, and as they had decided to rehearse at the corner coffee shop, to be true to the script, she had felt a not too unfamiliar rush when he looked up to recite his lines: “You know—that’s wonderful stuff. But that’s the way the French people are: they can understand everything—like life...”

Daphne, as Daphne, leaned forward and with the tip of her index finger wiped the Heinz ketchup from the corner of his mouth. Lyle, as Lyle (or so she believed), reached up for that tip of index finger and placed this tip between his lips and gave it a rather affectionate little bite.

They exchanged keys the next week.

She never
really felt safe
in Lyle's place.

Daphne would usually stay up at Lyle's place, a tenement building on 116th Street and Broadway. The air conditioner issue had been an ongoing issue and in his place there was no air conditioner to even argue about. Lyle had laughed at her studio in a doorman building on Park Avenue South. But, her old man had picked it out, "A fine investment," and offered her reduced rent till she made it as an actress. Translation: the man felt guilty for leaving his wife, Daphne's mother, and disappearing from their lives for more than 10 years.

Her father had been a drummer who had never quite hit. When he had left he had traveled in Europe living on near to nothing and playing gigs. One morning, she assumes, he must've woken up bright and early, smelled those coffee beans and decided to recreate his life. He got a job as a manager at some big import/export company.

Now he lived in New York with his new wife and their three-year-old daughter. Now he had time for her all the time; evidently this new marriage wasn't working out any better than the first. The big difference was that this time around he had big bucks invested in the condo he bought for Daphne, the condo he and his new family lived in and was too deep in the "debt and obligations of it all" to pick up and split. He'd drop in on Daphne constantly to escape the new life he had made.

Back when he lived with Daphne's mother, they had barely scraped by. They lived in a six-flight walk-up on 43rd and 8th Avenue. Her father working odd jobs, doing the occasional gig, and her mother teaching nursery school. The last memory she has of him from back then was when she was about seven and the Con Ed people had called. Her father yelled into the phone: "Shut the hell up and stop hassling me for money!"

Lyle had called her apartment a "princess pad": Could she help it if her father had hired this flaky designer who had decorated the place in a wall-o-mirrors and pale pink and ivory furniture and carpet?

She never really felt safe in Lyle's place. A crack addict lived in the lobby and always spoke to her every time she came in or went out. He said: "Hey fuckin' good lookin' you got me some money, honey?"

True, she and Lyle had been pretty happy for a while but the main problem had been that she was an actress like he was an actor which was always an extremely bad combination. Or rather, lack of paying true vocation. There had been a constant competition for who would get the first big break out and become a star first.

Back then, they had both followed Backstage religiously and had audition after audition to try and get an agent—or a part. Lyle had worked part-time as a waiter at a chic place called Roots or Bark, she can never remember which. Occasionally he did a voiceover for a cartoon; the last she knew of was DuckWing Duck. He hoped one day to do a David Mamet on Broadway.

Daphne never got any work. Course, there was the audition with the 70-year-old producer who asked her to strip down to “panties” so he could see what she’d look like in a bikini for a beach scene he was casting for some B-movie. But all that had led to was an invitation to sit on his lap:

“... and if you give me a back rub, baby, maybe I can get you a SAG card...”

True, the thing with the producer had been upsetting but it was probably more of a combination of losing interest in acting entirely—and Lyle—that made Daphne decide to commit herself to fashion and visual art exclusively. She went back to Art School, Parsons School of Design, where she had started, and had finally graduated two years ago.

Over the past four years, she had committed herself very seriously to school and her work; she made a concerted effort to erase most, if not all, desire that motivated just about every other single female she knew.

These friends were all looking for the perfect husband.

Case in point, her best friend Zoe Fallon. Zoe was 28, a window designer for Bloomingdale’s. She fixated on a different stranger every week. She’d meet some dark Ashton Kutcher type on say, the E train and then fake a sudden illness so (most hopefully) this stranger might be compelled to come help her. The damsel-in-distress-act really did work out for the most part, but really, just for the moment when the fake sickness hit. Generally, once the guy would see that Zoe was fine and not fainting dead-away in some malaise-of-her-own-making, he would return to his seat and politely look away. Daphne had actually had the opportunity to view Zoe in the act—more than once.

Zoe would fantasize and obsess over these guys; she would speak of dreams with deep meanings and symbols that could only be interpreted one way: this dark stranger from the train—or the bus, a messenger sent to her office, was destined to be with her. Why, excuse me sir, but I believe we’re meant for each other...

Months after the breakup, long after that final outbreak over the artificial-vs-natural-air issue, Lyle had appeared at Daphne's apartment at four am clad in a pair of cheetah print spandex leggings, Nike in white, and about 30 strands of fake pearls and rhinestones dripping down his bare chest. His breath smelled of whiskey and he posed against her doorframe and quoted the I Ching: "The great man accomplishes the change like a tiger, he is so confident that he does not need to employ divination." He cleared his throat and then added: "The Superior Man brings about the change like a leopard and lesser men promptly switch their allegiance."

He had solemnly taken her hand in his, "Yes, it's true, I've just left her, and yes, I may just want you back."

Daphne had let Lyle spend the night on the floor. He had thrown up before he left. He hadn't cleaned his puke up. Daphne spent half the next morning with a roll of Bounty paper towel, a can of Lysol and Dow Bathroom cleaner. The smell had never quite come out.

And, Daphne never heard from Lyle again.

Well, not entirely true. He did call once. All he said was: "What comes up, must come down." Then there was the hang up tone.

Daphne spent two years after the breakup thinking how Lyle was "it". How she'd never love anyone as much or ever would again. All the clichés, songs on the radio or on her phone about loving and losing or sympathy cards she'd browse through at the Duane Reade would make her eyes tear. But in that second year, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that the business of waiting to be discovered had meant in those three years they had been together, they had never really settled into any type of committed relationship; everything was always on hold. One old familiar exchange used to go like this:

"We can do that when we're both co-starring with Sharon Stone."

"Or Sylvester Stallone."

"He still any good?"

But apart from the business of being discovered, on the overall, most of their interchanges went something like this:

“I’m bored.”

“Should we skin a pig?”

(Yawn.) “It’s been done.”

“A baby one?”

“Done.”

“A goat?”

“I’m getting my coat.”

“Are you joking?”

“Nope—leaving.”

“Well then, should I get your hat?”

“Yes and isn’t that pat?”

“What—you want me to come after you?”

“Woo me?”

“Boo!”

“Oh, boohoo to you.”

“Wait, I’ll get the door.”

It didn’t matter who took which part in this monologue—it was forever turning. You know, ie:

“I love you.”

“Really?”

“Truly.”

“Well, I mean, gee, now I’m not too sure...”

What’s the matter, aren’t you into it?” Curt would be furiously

trying to pull off Daphne’s stockings and she would be resisting.

“Well, yeah,” Daphne would sit up and reach for her spotted Kate Spade bag, pull out a packet of Marlboro and light up. Blow smoke.

“So, what the hell are you doing now?”

Certainly, over the past four years there had been others: a dinner here, a drink there, a walk through Gramercy Park. More actors, a dancer, a con man, and a lyrical composer (a second-rate poet).

The con man had been, hands down, the most amusing; he lived in the adjoining apartment building. They could see each other from their bathroom windows. They met one Sunday afternoon in the courtyard when he was picking up what seemed like hundreds of bags of trash some glamorous brunette threw out her kitchen window.

This glamorous brunette had a weekly ritual (the con man told Daphne the story) of washing her hair in her kitchen sink every Saturday. The con man spied her from his living room window, a direct view in.

Once the glamorous brunette finished washing her hair, she would twist it all up into a perfect bun on top of her head then wrap the wet coif into a crisp white towel. She'd put on an orange terrycloth bathrobe then crank open the window and begin the process of dumping Heftys out her window.

Since Daphne and the con man's building had a policy where the individual owners were responsible for maintenance, the residents took turns collecting that great heap of garbage the glamorous brunette had dumped. It was on one such cleanup that Daphne and con man had met up.

Con man had buried his hands far into his worn out Lee jean pockets and winked. He slid up next to Daphne and told her how he had once opened up one of the Heftys and there inside were tons and tons of resumes and photographs. He said he had recently found out that the glamorous brunette was Katrina Cardinal, only the most famous gallery dealer on the Tribeca.

Con man had dramatically picked up one of the bags and ripped it open and there inside were hundreds of discarded photographs and resumes. One by the top, Daphne noted, had a carefully penned-in note attached: I thank you, Ms Cardinal for taking the time to consider my work.

"Can you believe it? They've probably never been looked at." Con man winked again. This was probably the only true story he would tell her.

Over the next year he lied to her about everything, from where he worked (he changed jobs every few weeks, everything from telemarketing to law clerk) to what he ate for dinner.

A certain evening in particular stands out: he had told her on the phone about eating this “incredible” shrimp and pineapple pizza. He had joked, “If you get over here fast enough, I’ll fight you for the last slice!”

Five minutes later, there were the empty Chinese take-out containers strewn across his coffee table. He asked: “Hungry? Want a little Moo Shoo Pork?”

Three or four, probably more times, different girls had rang the bell for Daphne’s apartment asking for con man. She would hear the bell when she had been safely tucked into bed and her heart would race as she got up to answer it, wondering who it could be.

Some girl would be in the hall, “Is Nigel home?”

“No,” Daphne would say, “Who’s there?”

“Sasha. You sure he isn’t home?”

Daphne knew that con man had put these girls up to this, but she had no clue what it meant.

Their relationship—if you could call it that—never got any more physical than a closed mouth kiss, his arm falling over her chest, a breast. There was the evening she spent the night, but they slept in their clothes (too much chianti) and the climax of the evening was playing a furious game of footsies.

She lasted as long as she did with con man because, well, actually, he did have a thing for Monopoly and he was the first person she had ever met who had the patience to play through the whole game and then say, “Again?”

Also, if you made an effort to squint, he did look a tad, just a bit like James Dean.

Really, it was an evening like any other New York evening. Then when thunder cracked the lightning which followed took place in a countdown of no more (no less) than a total of five. A burst of water came rushing down in a roar forming what looked like a wall of vertical rivers which, of course, appeared to converge in a torrent of ocean and then—then he had dipped in toward her—and—kissed her. Mouth wide open, eyes shut tight.

Curt would be tied up in a tangle of their discarded clothes. Daphne, nude, smoking and staring pensively out the window. In a small childish voice she would say, “I’m sorry, but I can’t do it right now.”

She would reach for her dress while staring at the Hallmark picture to avoid his gaze. He would grab for her arm, “Fuck, what you are doing?” he would hiss.

“I’m sorry,” she would whisper in that childish little voice, “I just can’t.”

“I just can’t believe it!”

Daphne would slip on her dress and reach for her stockings and shoes.

Curt would pull on his shirt and pants and follow her as she’d make her way to the door: “I just can’t believe it. I just can’t believe you.” He would be shaking his head as she’d walk down the hall to the elevator.

“Man, I just can’t believe you.” She could still hear him muttering as she rode down to the lobby.

Daphne would run into the rain, hail a taxi. The driver would turn around and stare at her. When the cab arrived at her apartment and she paid the fare, the driver would turn around and say: “Nothing pisses me off more than skinny little rich white girls like you.”

The next day Curt would take the subway to a BMW dealer on 10th Avenue. He’d pass the salesman his shiny gold credit card and lease a shiny metallic silver convertible with black leather bucket seats. He’d drive that car way over the limit to Long Island. He would speed up to his childhood home and barely miss the tree in front of the Stewart’s house, his parents’ next door neighbor.



ELLEN BLOOMENSTEIN

I was writing a lot about sex in my 20s and 30s. Then I was writing about non-sex (which some may confuse with nonsense—ha!); I was thinking a lot about how people avoid sex and get all caught up in their heads instead. I was thinking about privilege and what it means to have and have not. I was also thinking a lot about beauty and what being beautiful is all about, how very beautiful one can be on the inside, or how very ugly. I was thinking about being connected and not connected. I wrote *Curt* to explore a lot of these questions. I was in essence exploring the polarities of yes and no.

I have an MFA in Fiction and Poetry from the New School. I've had stories and poems published online at *Drunk Monkeys* and *Referential*, and in journals *Zeek*, *Rosebud*, *Good Foot*.



IMAGE BY COURTNEY CLAYTON



LOOK UP
BY CASIMIR GRABOWSKI

A quick workout before a Friday night out. The 75-lb dumbbells met overhead. I felt the pump building my chest, arms, and ego.

I lowered the weights to my chest. And that's when it happened. My smartphone slipped out of my shorts. It was like a vital organ erupted out of my skin.

The device that knew me better than my mother, God, and even my own self was suddenly a pile of manufactured guts.

Anxiety grew, panic rose, and the fear of missing out overwhelmed me. I scooped up the heap of microchips and plastic. My eyes stared at it to attempt a resurrection, but I had no transcendent power.

I dashed out of the gym into the hot, heavy summer. I stood hopelessly on the sidewalk. People bowing to their screens walked past. "Siri, directions to my apartment," I said. "Siri?" I said, but she was dead.

I somehow managed to find my place. I stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the 19th floor. The elevator stopped on the 5th floor.



**Hello? Please help!
My phone is broke!**

She walked into the elevator, an ethereal millennial with coffee in hand, earbuds in, and limitless data delivering her a steady stream of dopamine. She pressed the button for her floor without looking up. Hello? I wanted to say. Please help me! My phone is broke! But without an app to hide behind or a filter to perfect my delivery, I didn't say a word.

I tried to catch a glimpse of her screen. Let me see your screen, baby! I won't touch! The elevator came to a dingy stop on the 14th floor. She stepped off, bowing to her screen, without even a perfunctory, "Have a nice night." I never existed. And she never existed inside that elevator. All that existed was her phone.

I arrived on my floor. I ran past apartments full of people with working devices, reached my door, cleared my coffee table and laid out the wreckage. Its microchips gushed out like an overloaded ham sandwich. I got on my knees, prayed for a miracle, pressed the power button, but didn't get a response. The pile of high-tech hardware made me weep. "Please, God, just let it work!" But without a device I couldn't even reach Him.

It was Friday night in the city. There were girls to swipe, buddies to meet, and a fleet of chauffeurs ready at a tap. I could feel other people's texts, tweets, and snaps zooming through the air. A digital siren song haunted my head.

My head fell onto the coffee table. I shut my eyes to escape my phoneless reality. Darkness, though, only provided a playground for the digital-ghosts. Messages, dating apps, and social media feeds superimposed on the back of my eyelids. I couldn't escape the wired-world.

I looked up. A frame on my TV stand had a photo of mom and dad. I crawled over to the stand and picked up the dusty frame. Someone snapped the pharmacy-developed picture decades ago with an actual camera. My fingers swiped it, but there was only one picture. And this single photo proved to be a peephole to a disconnected past. "They did it," I said to myself, "so can I."



*More people bowing
to their screens.*

I decided to do the unthinkable. Go out on a Friday night without a phone.

I felt naked without it. People waiting for rideshares at the corner. The aromas of alfresco restaurants wafted through the steamy Atlanta air. I stood on the sidewalk, turned my head to the left, and saw people on their devices. I looked to the right and saw more people bowing to their screens. But across the street I saw a man standing there without a device. Humanity in its true state. It was me reflected in a store window.

I walked around Midtown Atlanta with a liberated spirit. People in their phones bumped into me. I said, “Excuse me,” and, “Sorry about that,” but they didn’t notice.

A street sign caught my eye. It displayed the outline of a train with an arrow below it. I tapped the sign but nothing happened.

“Looking for the station?” someone said. I turned around to see an old man, somewhere north of 70. “Uh,” I stammered. If my body were a phone, the senior citizen would’ve seen the bubble that signaled I was crafting a response. “Yeah,” I managed.

My eyes examined the old man's face. Deep valleys on his cheeks suggested a hard aging. His hair receded and fell out decades ago, but behind his green eyes I could see vestigial flickers of a young man. Someone who had lived without the fear of missing out. He was a raw human being. No filters or Photoshop. Just an old man stopping to give a stranger direction. "Follow the arrow," he pointed down the street, "You'll see the station a block down."

His voice hit my ears like air-conditioning after a hot walk in July. I didn't know how to respond. Finally, after a few seconds, I mumbled something, but he was already gone.

His direction got me to the train station. The throngs of people waiting for the next train were a cult bowing to the same hollow white light. A mass of people tied to the same puppet string.

"Uh, excuse me?" I said to a man in his early 30s with a calculated bushy beard. He looked up. The reflection of a social media feed filled his eyes. Wires from his phone ran into his ears like an IV pump. An ancillary device lit up on his wrist. He pulled one bud slightly out of his ear.

"Can I be your friend?" I asked. "Where's your Add Friend button?" My hands groped his body for the button, but he slapped them away.

"The fuck you doing, man?!"

"I'm phoneless!" I cried.

A crowd formed around us and some of them pressed record. Their devices enveloped me in a white light. No one said anything. They just recorded a phoneless man on the platform.

An train's horn shattered the moment. People turned away to board. And just like that, my 15 seconds of virality was over. No one cared any more.

I looked at the train stopped in front of me. I couldn't see the conductor's rating or his past rides, but I decided to get on for a few stops anyway.

Back up on the street I spotted a tavern kitty-corner to the station and walked in that direction.

The electronic red hand on the pedestrian crossing told me to wait. A man bowing to his screen walked right into the traffic. "Hey!" I shouted. He kept walking and scrolling, distracted from life and near death.



***This is the part when
you say something.***

The tavern didn't have a rating on it. I examined every inch of the exterior but couldn't find reviews. So I took a deep breath and went in regardless.

A Friday night crowd filled the bar. People on their phones occupied booths along the wall. Varying amounts of devices on each tabletop like little oxygen tanks for its owners. A couple sitting at the bar snapped a selfie. Another flash from a phone camera illuminated a girl snapping a picture of her drink.

I spotted an empty bar seat and parked my phoneless-self.

The bartender gave me a laminated menu. "Beer on this side," he pointed. "Food on the other," he walked away.

The menu was painfully crude. I didn't see any videos, graphics, or click bait. Just raw text. I tapped items that interested me, but nothing happened. The text simply sat there. "You ready?" asked the bartender.

"Uh," I stammered. "I'll have this one," my fingers repeatedly tapped the name of a craft beer. The bartender didn't confirm. He simply plunged his hand into a cooler behind the bar and produced a bottle.

The glistening, brown bottle stood in front of me. I patted my pockets. Nope. Not there. No phone to snap a picture of this beer and post it on social media. I could see the bar's wifi flowing around me, but when I reached out to grab it, I came up empty-handed. A woman's laugh filled my right ear. "Uh, what are you doing?" she said.

I turned and saw a young woman sitting down on the stool beside me. A ponytail corralled her long blonde hair. Ink shaped in a small cross marked her left wrist. And her bright red finger nail polish contained the reflection of a phoneless man.

"Um, I, uh?"

She shook her head and laughed. "You were, like, grabbing something in the air when I walked up," she said. "Reaching for the stars, huh?"

Her red fingers gripped her drink. She brought it to her lips for a sip. I imagined my face was an array of emojis, but emojis don't speak. Her iceberg eyes shot me an imploring look. "This is the part when you say something," she said.

I raised my hand in front of her face and made a swiping motion to the right. She laughed. "There you go again!" she said. "I'm beginning to think you see things!"

"Sorry," I mumbled. "It's a habit."

I took a long pull of my beer hoping to wash away the embarrassment.

"You're a weird one, aren't you?" she said. "But I like weird." She offered her hand, "I'm Olivia."

An incipient panic grew inside me. I patted my empty pockets. "Siri!" I yelled. "What do I do?" Silence reminded me she wasn't there, but a real voice filled the void.

"Try shaking her hand," Olivia mimicked. She crafted her voice to imitate that famous lady's but failed miserably. It was adorable.

Laughter nearly knocked both of us off our stools. I introduced myself. And I had to say it, so I said it. "There's something I noticed about you—"

"Yeah?" she said. "What's that?"

"You have no phone on you."

Olivia laughed, "Sometimes I leave it at home." She took a sip of her drink, then: "I only live a few blocks from here."



Another viral moment went up in smoke.

“You leave your phone at home?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Wow.”

“Well, hey,” she looked me up and down. “I don’t see you with a phone.”

My eyes adjusted to seeing a woman in the flesh versus a pixelated screen. Her voice and laughter filled my ears. She raised her glass, “But cheers to our phoneless-selves.”

“Wait!” I held my beer on the bar. “How will I know if we have any mutual friends?”

“Um?” confusion grew on her face. “Just ask me, I guess?”

“And how will I know if we have any common interests, like, hiking and pizza or movies?”

“It’s called getting to know each other,” she laughed. Her smile reassured me. I raised my beer.

The sound of clinking glass kicked off a marathon conversation. We were free. Neither us tethered to devices, no check-in. Flashes of selfie-taking camera phones from bar patrons reminded us of the disembodied world we left behind. We were no longer one of them. Her unfiltered personality refreshed me. It didn’t come in manipulated photos or an edited bio, but I loved it. We teased and flirted. Our raw laughter replaced LOL’s, LMAO’s, and SMH’s.

Hours passed and so did the drinks. Two disconnected souls connecting with each other in a wired-world.

After we finished a final round, she extended an invitation. "I want to get out of here," she said. "You want to go back to my place?"

"Siri," I teased. "Should I go back to Olivia's?"

"Not if you're going to say that again," Olivia said. We laughed at the stupid joke and wandered out of the bar.

Our phoneless-selves stepped into the sticky Atlanta night. Globes of white light passed us on the sidewalk. She grabbed my hand. After a few blocks, we looked at each other and sniffed the air. "You smell that?" she asked.

We walked around the corner. "Whoa!" Olivia shouted. "Is that a car?"

Fire consumed a parked car no more than a few hundred feet from us. "You think someone's in there?" she asked. I detected a genuine concern in her voice.

We sat on the hard, concrete curb and watched. She laid her blonde head on my shoulder. A mass of people crowded the burning car, one man commentating while he took video. Firefighters showed up and put out the flames. Another viral moment went up in smoke. And it was on to the next one.

We reached her building. A young man stood at the elevator looking at his phone. Earbuds blocked the outside world from his mind. He offered a fleeting glance, but quickly returned to his screen. The elevator arrived.

He hit a button for his floor. Olivia pressed a button for a higher floor.

Olivia gave me a luring smirk, "You think he'll notice?"

"No," I said.

I pushed her body up against the elevator wall. She locked herself around my waist.

At the elevator's first stop the man exited. I didn't care. He was never there, but we were.

The elevator climbed. Our in-flight make-out continued. Another ding announced our arrival on her floor. She grabbed my hand and raced me into her apartment.

Momentum carried our phoneless bodies into her bedroom. She fell back onto the bed. Her legs slid out of her skirt. And her body squirmed out of her top. Our kissing and caressing evolved into more.

"Almost there!" she gasped.

A vibration shattered the moment. I saw a light rise above her breasts. It was like the morning sun. “Keep going!” she gasped.

She held the phone over her face. It lit her upper torso in a white glow. I stood up.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

“What—what,” I stammered, “what are you doing?”

“Huh?” she said. “Oh!” She set the phone on the nightstand, “Sorry, I had to text my friend back real quick.”

I stared at her phone. It was a working device. My heart envied and despised it all at once.

“Finish me!” she said, “I’m so close!” Her foot rubbed my groin, “then I’ll finish you!”

“No.”

“What?”

“Our phoneless-selves,” I said. “What happened to that?”

“Look!” she stashed the phone in the nightstand’s drawer. “My phone is away! Go back down on me!”

She scooted behind me and threw her arms around my neck. I felt her warm lips drop a fleeting kiss on my cheeks. “Can we just forget this and go back to what we were doing?” she asked. “It was so good.”

“Throw it out the window.”

“What? What are you talking about? Look. I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to piss you off. My friend texted me and I had to text her back. What are you doing?”

It was a crank window. I rotated the handle until I felt the muggy, midnight air creep in. Then I ripped the screen off the frame.

“Throw it out.”

“No!” she cried. “And what the fuck did you do to my window?!”

“Fine,” I said, “then I will.”

“No!”

“Give me your phone!”

“No!” she cried. “You’re fucking crazy!” She cradled the glowing device in her hands like a mother protecting her newborn from a monster.

“GET THE FUCK OUT!” she screamed. “I’M CALLING THE POLICE!” She brandished 9-1-1 on her phone’s dial screen like a loaded pistol. All she had to do was hit send, but she didn’t.

I stood there in the dark. Fear and panic filled our heavy breaths. “YOU’RE FUCKED UP!” she said, “I first thought you were insane! But then we talked, and I liked you! But you are FUCKED UP!”

“Our,” I managed between breaths, “phoneless-selves!”

Terror filled her eyes. “Get out!” she pleaded. “Please! I don’t want to call the cops! Just get the fuck out!”

I started my exit, but I stopped at the bedroom door. I looked back at her. We locked eyes, searching for an answer to what just happened. She eventually broke the silence. “Siri,” she said. The voice command gave its cue that it was listening. “How to get a lunatic out of your apartment.” It instantly replied.

“Okay,” Siri said. “I found this on the web on ‘how to get a lunatic out of your apartment.’” I don’t know if our stupid joke or Siri’s voice made me smile, but I did. And she did, too. Our eyes locked.

A smile stretched on her face. We nodded at each other to say goodbye. I left her naked on her bed. Her device cast its white, hollow light on her raw flesh. Humanity in its modern state.

I stepped out of her bedroom into the apartment. A framed inspirational quote on the wall stopped me. I looked at the framed message. It had a single, wilted rose on it and the words: Just let it be.

The elevator was empty. I was alone, phoneless, and free. Swells from the night I had experienced crashed into my mind. It was a Friday night off the grid. And it was a night of freedom from the wired world. It was a night without a phone.

Outside the apartment building I had only taken a few steps when a man looking down at his phone bumped into me. “Sorry,” he said, without stopping. “Hey, look up,” I said.



CASIMIR GRABOWSKI

Let's put our phones down and be human again. My personal attempts at this, though somewhat respectable, always end with a relapse for more of that cheap dopamine. I think about writing more than I actually write. Your smile and friendly chatter will make my day. Bukowski, McCullers, and Eminem echo in my mind. I get stoned off the weather and drunk off the romance of my urban neighborhood. Give me overpriced rent, rough sex, and Middle Eastern food. Look! We're all so millennial and good looking!





**Why do you
care so much?**



IMAGE BY JONATHAN BORBA

**Easy to create
what you desire
harder to make it
happen.**

PARALLEL PARKING
BY SACHA MOORE

was always surprised we weren't closer given we both harbored artistic sensibilities and were newly minted in marriage. She lived upstairs from me, along with her aristocratically (I thought) named husband, Hollister McNeal. Mike thought his name was ridiculous and, by dint of that, he was as well. Mike has little imagination and even less patience.

But Lucinda: she was ethereal, with straight honey-brown hair and long tapering fingers. She was thin, almost too thin, wafer-like with large grey eyes, and I always sensed, when I passed her in the hall, that her mind was elsewhere. But I imagined wherever it was—someplace I'd like to have access to—would always be closed to me. She would nod and say hello in her soft, feather-like voice. She might respond if I commented on the weather. But it always seemed to halt shortly after that. She rarely, if ever, offered anything up. Perhaps her relationship with her husband was more complete and she didn't need any more friends.

Of course, maybe it was me, with my boring name (Alice) and my here-and-nowness, in essence my small hands and stubby fingers, I would be of no interest.

“Why do you care so much?” Mike would ask me. “What does she have that you want?” I’m not sure I could have articulated it. I tried to tell him how she seemed above the rest of us, yet mysterious, perhaps hiding some secret pain. Mike said I had too much imagination and turned on the television.

Meanwhile I wondered what Lucinda and Hollister were doing, collaborating on some beautiful art, drinking wine over mussels, making plans to take an ayahuasca trip. I turned to look at Mike, enraptured in the blue-ish light.

It became clear we were not going to be friends. We weren’t even friendly. I sometimes wondered if I was attracted to her and created an imaginary perfect life for her as a result of some dissatisfaction in my own life. Because isn’t that what imagination is for? It’s easy to create what you desire there. Harder to make it actually happen, contrary to what the self-help books say. Mike has little patience for those too.

I was on my way to work. Running late as usual and then realizing half-way to the subway I had forgotten my metro-card and did a quick calculus as to whether it was worth it to go back and get it (it was) that I was surprised to find Lucinda in the hallway, doubled over. Her eyes glassy, her face pale, her breathing ragged. I ran to her and asked if I could help. She tried to shake her head, but she looked so awful I couldn’t in good conscience leave her there. “I could call 911,” I said and with that her eyes got wider and she managed to shake her head vehemently. I asked if I could help her up the stairs. She stared at me blankly which I took to be a sign that I could. I asked her if she thought she was going to be sick. She shook her head. Then I helped her to put her arm around me and we slowly made our way up the stairs. She didn’t say a word but her breathing remained audible.

I bet you have a vinyl shower curtain.

She smelled faintly of flowers—freesia, gardenia. She was light, a touch bony. I imagined she had some kind of food poisoning, maybe a stomach virus. I was shocked to have caught someone usually so collected, so beyond reproach in a moment of stark vulnerability. And I could swoop in. I was needed, I had a purpose, I could (finally—oh how it had long been a constant wish) see the inside of her apartment. When we reached her door, she fumbled in her bag to get her keys. She seemed too weak to be able to open her door so I did it for her.

It was streaming with early spring sunlight, streaking through oversized windows. Again, there was a faint smell of flowers when we walked into the apartment. Lovely. There was a litany of plants. I felt as if I had walked into a sacred garden, pothos hanging from the windows, their trail of leaves never ending. There was a vine growing up one of the exposed brick walls, peace lilies, ferns, a couple of fruit trees it looked like.

I had entered a sort of urban sanctuary and I immediately thought of my own, somewhat uninspiring apartment, the quotidian Ikea and Target.

Her floors were wide wood-planked and largely bare save for a wool braided rug; the living room opened to the bedroom, they had removed the door and knocked down the wall.

I helped Lucinda to her bed, adorned with a faded blue and white quilt. It looked antique. She groaned as I ungainly dropped her onto it. "I think...I think...I'm going to be..."

I ran through the light-streamed apartment to the kitchen, stopping short because the mixture of industrial appliances and reclaimed wood materials was nothing short of amazing, at least to me. I looked around for a plastic bag, a plastic bowl, something disposable she could throw up in, but all I found was stoneware. Come to think of it (later) I didn't come across any plastic at all. I grabbed a brown earthenware bowl (there was nothing else) and ran back to her room but by the time I got there she was in the bathroom, retching. I stood there, clutching the bowl, awkward, uncertain, slightly embarrassed. Is she okay? Do I just... leave?

The bathroom door opened, and she looked at me: pale, hollow-eyed, frowning slightly as if suddenly remembering that I was in her space. I stammered, "Are you okay? I didn't want to just leave..."

She looked at me squarely, "I bet you have a vinyl shower curtain." She continued, "And I bet you use poisonous, chemical housecleaners."

Is she delusional? My thoughts must have been written all over my face for she next said, quietly, "I'm fine. It's hyperemesis gravidarum." In response to my blank stare, she saw the need to explain further but seemed sorry she had to do so, "I'm pregnant." Oh. And with that it was quite clear that it was time for me go.

I might have a crush on her.

Did I have a vinyl shower curtain? It was just a shower curtain. I had it from my old apartment, it has fish on it. What is the type of person who owns a vinyl shower curtain anyhow? Apparently if Lucinda thought of me at all it was to put me into this category, which, honestly, didn't sound so great. I was beginning to get the distinct impression that it wasn't just indifference she felt towards me, but disdain.

For some reason instead of offering up a fuck you/she sucks—which I would usually do (I think?) I realized I might have a crush on her despite the fact I was married, despite the fact she didn't seem to like me very much. Yet I so desperately wanted her to like me, refusing to acknowledge whom she thought she knew was me, the real me. She was right though, I did, in fact, have a vinyl shower curtain.

I was knee-deep in clearing out the bathroom, everything from under the washbasin had been pulled out, when Mike came home. “What the hell—?” Mike asked.

I pursed my lips. I had spent much of the day at work (because who actually does work at work?) reading about off-gassing, chemical sensitivities, endocrine disruptors, POVs. “I’m getting rid of toxins,” I explained, “I refuse to be the type of person who owns a vinyl shower curtain.”

“Vinyl shower curtain? What are you talking about?”

I told him what had happened that morning.

“She’s behind this. Should have figured. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you have a crush on her.”

“I know. And she doesn’t even like me.”

“All the more reason.”

“I think she sees me as this...” I paused, trying to find the right words, “this pedestrian person.”

“What the hell do you care what that weirdo thinks? Women—I don’t get it.”

“She’s not a weirdo and, no, you don’t get it.” Of course, by then he had walked into the other room and didn’t hear me.

Mike didn’t get Lucinda. He thought she and Hollister were kind of strange. But not in a particularly interesting way. Meanwhile, while I half-hated to admit it, I aspired to be more like her, even though she wasn’t very nice to me. Mike gets frustrated with a certain kind of artistic sensibility, what he would call arrogance. He tended to find it more artifice than art. Which generally I liked about him. But there was something about Lucinda, like she was holding fast to some kind of secret and I’d just love to find out what it was. But that, obviously, was going to be difficult. I googled how to make my own cleaning formulas since even the Meyers scented cleaner I had purchased (and it wasn’t cheap!) seemed to be full of dubious compounds.

What do you see in him?

I didn't see Lucinda for a few weeks after that. Funny how that goes. Sometimes I would run into the same neighbors multiple times a week and then months would go by and I wouldn't see them at all. I thought fleetingly of her pregnancy.

Pregnancy wasn't something Mike and I talked about much. We seemed too young to have kids, to think about the shift to strollers and spit-up. We liked going out to see bands play and spontaneous outings with our friends and were loath to give that up for something that just... didn't seem, well on the surface anyway...all that interesting. Although the notion of babies was slightly abhorrent I found myself increasingly intrigued by Lucinda's pregnancy. I wondered how Lucinda felt about having a baby. Was she excited? Scared? Maybe she knew something I didn't.

The banging started after dinner one night. It was sort of quiet at first but with increasing intensity as it built in crescendo. Mike was growing incensed. As the banging got louder and the expletives from Mike got longer it finally reached a breaking point. He scraped his chair back so hard it almost fell over as he got up and stomped to the front door.

Mike wasn't a particularly smiley guy, but he was rarely angry, not like this. I braced myself, my stomach doing flip-flops hoping it didn't turn into an ugly scene and I would hear shouting in the hallway. But in about 10 minutes, Mike returned, livid still, but the noise had subsided.

"A fucking shamanic séance. For the baby. What's wrong with those people?"

"Really? How many people were there?"

"Not enough for them to be making that much noise, Jesus Alice, why don't you fucking move in with them?"

I sat there, stung, stunned, wondering if he understood me at all. Or cared to. He didn't understand why I would find her fascinating. And he didn't seem to want to. What's wrong with men? Too many of them don't find other people very interesting (at least the straight ones I've known), so they miss so much of what makes life interesting.

The next time I saw Lucinda was at a party we were hosting. Which we did on occasion because we had a reasonable amount of friends who were amenable to parties. I can't pretend I was great at it, but I was okay. Though it was exhausting. But the next day amidst empty drink glasses and crusted food, Mike and I would rehash it and that was usually fun. Our respective friends had a grudging acceptance of each other. I jokingly suggested to Mike we invite Lucinda and Hollister but he turned to me and his face was taut, "Absolutely not." No humor there. I suspected my fascination with them was starting to irk him.

So I was out in the hall saying goodbye to Tessa, who was mildly depressed and caught up in a romantic snafu with someone at her office so decided to leave the party early, when Lucinda came up the stairs. Her eyes were darker in the dim, dingy hallway light and she surprised me by addressing me first. Of her own accord.

"What do you see in him?" It came out a little clipped, as if it was something she had mulled over for a while. Who was she to ask me that, and more to the point, to suggest that there was something wrong? There was a judgement there and I'm surprised she expressed it. Because people generally don't, unless it's pretty egregious. No

**Just like in
life we can't
see clearly.**

one had ever hinted anything untoward about Mike and my relationship. It's that line people don't cross, except for family sometimes but my parents were always a bit disconnected. Like they were mostly relieved that I managed to get married at all. And Mike seemed friendly and affable enough and gainfully employed if not overly ambitious. And what else mattered, really. It's not as if they were paying attention to the intricacies of my day-to-day interactions or, honestly, to any of my internal interactions, ever.

Who was this relative stranger to wonder then? Was she hitting on a certain truth or attempting to undermine me because she knew she could? Was she able to gleefully discern I weighed her every word, noted her every gesture, wished I was allowed access into her hallowed sacred world? And while aghast, and thankfully a bit drunk, I was curious to hear more.

“What do you mean?”

“He's not very nice to you,” she said, almost haughtily.

I looked askance. I did not know what to say, how to react. I never thought of it as not nice, more that there was a whole way I perceived the world that he just didn't really get and thought was sort of silly. My fascination with Lucinda being a prime example. I think he put up with it because it didn't threaten him in any way. But it's not just that he didn't get it, it's that he didn't want to. It wasn't interesting to him, mostly annoying. Is that what she was getting at?

I often likened life to parallel parking. We are all trying to back our way into a relatively tight space. And the key to getting it right, to getting your car into the spot (to getting your life where you think it ought to be) is when you need to cut the wheel. In my mind it's when I scream, "cut" like they do in the movies. I put my foot on the brake and whip the steering wheel all the way in the other direction. And I have to do it at precisely the right moment otherwise the angle will be off, and the car won't fit. And I will have to start all over again. To be good at it, one needs to have a feel for it because a person parallel parking can't see clearly. Just like in life we can't see clearly because

we are all inside our own heads. But if someone is watching, they can see your trajectory far more accurately. It would be easy for someone outside to know instantly when to call out "cut". I couldn't help but wonder if Lucinda had just called out "cut" because she actually cared or if she just didn't like me (or Mike) very much and decided to undermine a perfectly decent relationship. Regardless, her blunt observation sobered me right up.

She continued climbing up the stairs, moving effortlessly despite being close to the end of her pregnancy. "How—how so?" I called out to her back. She stopped, turned around and shrugged. "Pay attention," she said and kept walking.

What unnerved me most was whether this minor disconnect would be something I would point to years later amidst an unenviable breakup as one of the initial telltale signs that I was too scared, or too naïve, to take heed.

Before I met Mike, it was hard to imagine the idea of marriage, at least for me. The notion of Spending the Rest of My Life with someone I liked well enough and was reasonably attracted to seemed a difficult proposition because they (we?) had always maintained their (our?) separateness. They forever remained that Person I was Dating. We never quite became a “we”, whatever that was, although other people seemed to flow fluidly right into it. My crushes, on the other hand, contained a feverish intensity but our ultimate togetherness existed only as fantasy. Usually because they were married, gay or, frankly, just not that into me.

The desire for marriage, a somewhat frequent topic amongst my friends, is not just anxiety for women, although it's often portrayed as such. Aren't we assigned an age we ought to be married by? What is it now? 32? 35? Blamed for, or made to seem desperate because of, our biological clock? Oh, they've twisted it. I remember overhearing a group of men in their mid-20s at a party expressing anxiety about getting married, worried it might not happen for them. And they sounded no different than women do. But somehow men are granted immunity while women get scapegoated.

Up until I met Mike, being single felt like the norm. I honestly didn't expect to meet anyone until much later. I could easily imagine being invited to (many) good friends' weddings and getting set up with a version of their cousin Larry who lives in Mahopac and works as an actuary. And I'd look at the nuptial couple, drunk on love—or relief, probably both—and then look over at Larry, picking something out of his teeth, and convince myself that being alone is actually not that bad. When you aren't connected, and not sure you ever have been, it's easy enough to live without it. Accepting, sadly, a little forlornly, perhaps, that it is something that happens to others, not to you.

Meeting Mike, at a bar no less, and feeling that immediate rapport and comfort, was a pleasant (if unexpected) surprise. It was more intense than my previous boyfriends and lacked the doomed quality of my crushes. It was easy with Mike in that I never had the crazed neurotic wondering of when or if he was going to call. He always did, just before I wondered whether he would.

Talking to him was easy, even if we didn't always agree, we were quick to agree to disagree. We were... compatible. And what a warm comfort it was to have someone to leave the party with, to have someone to bring to a concert, to not have to plan manically Every Single Weekend, so as to stave off inevitable loneliness. I felt like I could finally take a deep breath because I had become, like other lucky people, part of a long-term couple. Phew.

It wasn't long after the party when I woke up in the middle of the night, almost suddenly. All was quiet, but something seemed different. Was it a smell? A stillness? Something...seemed... altered. Was Lucinda about to give birth? How...strange...another human being will emerge from her...sort of wonderful and a bit barbaric at the same time. I nudged Mike. He groaned. "I think she's giving birth," I said. He groaned. "Jesus," he swore, "Maybe they will move out and your obsession with her will end." He turned over and fell right back

to sleep. I remained awake a long time straining to hear, marking the date, wondering why it would be important for me to know her baby was being born now. At home.

Mike said later that he thought home births were beyond risky and did not approve at all. What if something catastrophic happened? Why take such an uncalculated risk? He was adamant. I didn't know Mike had such a strong opinion about...giving birth. Or was he just morally opposed to anything Lucinda espoused? I wasn't sure what I thought. It isn't very interesting, until it's your turn. It struck me that Lucinda thought about things quite fully, that everything in her life—from her laundry detergent to her shower curtain to eschewing all things plastic. It would make sense she thought completely about birthing options and turned her nose up at prevailing societal dictates. But I kept my feelings quiet in the face of Mike's vociferous admonishments.

Mike and I were planning a vacation, our first since our honeymoon. I wanted to go to Italy, he wanted to go to Iceland, so we settled on Ireland. I didn't see Lucinda, caught up in the planning and execution of our trip. But it always struck me that I never heard the baby cry—even when it was born. I said something one day to Mike and his response was the child was probably possessed, like in Rosemary's Baby. I rolled my eyes.

I ran into Lucinda coming home from work one evening shortly before we were to depart on our trip. She was carrying her baby in some sort of fabric contraption attached to her chest. The baby looked to be asleep. Lucinda's hair was long and full, her skin radiant, her eyes bright. I mumbled a congratulations. And then she went off. She started talking about the matriarchy, about witches, "They killed us because we were too powerful and forced us to heed their monastic religions, emblematic of this dreadful patriarchy. Women had ruled for a long time but much of it is lost to history because it wasn't written down. They have successfully brainwashed us for millennia,

making us believe we are powerless without them, that we are only the sum of our sexuality, that raising children is less than whatever it is they do. But how could we not have the power? We control the next generation. Never forget that. If we didn't give birth, there would be no world at all." While I was intrigued, she seemed a touch crazed. Had I been living under a rock (a matriarchy?!?!?) or was she unhinged?

I knew if I told Mike he'd say she was crazy and probably make a crack about how she ought to be committed. Sometimes I felt in the middle of these two forces: Mike, the known, the reliable, the conventional, the comfortable, and Lucinda, the unknown, the intriguing, the mysterious, the mercurial. She claimed Mike was undermining me and Mike was quite certain of Lucinda's unwarranted sanctimoniousness. And I wondered if I could safely commit to liking them both.

A few days after returning from Ireland tat I ran into the super and he mentioned that apartment 13 had moved out: Lucinda and Holister's. I was taken aback and asked if he knew why. He had no idea. He just said that they cleared out completely. They didn't give the landlord any kind of notice, they even lost their security deposit. Seems like they had vanished. I was deeply saddened. A few weeks later I came home and found a note addressed to Lucinda on the ground near the mailboxes. I knew it was a federal offense to open someone else's mail but that wasn't going to stop me. Inside was a card acknowledging a loss and something about finding strength in a greater wisdom to carry on. In the pit of my stomach I knew it was the baby. I stood there in the hallway, tears splattering the card I should never have opened. Why did life have to continually remind us of its cruelty? Even Mike was stunned and horrified. I was so thankful in the days and weeks that followed not to be alone; even though I had come to realize that in many ways we are, in fact, always alone.

About a month later I found out I was pregnant. What a dubious honor. For in that split second of revelation it occurred to me that a baby wasn't necessarily going to bring us closer—and that marriage and childbirth offered no guarantees. But then again, neither does life.



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PARALLEL PARKING BY SACHA MOORE
34THPARALLEL MAGAZINE ISSUE 62 🍷 34THPARALLEL.NET

SACHA MOORE

Ever since I can remember I've categorized things, like the ways people dress. I was obsessed with the quintessential preppy professorial look of my English teacher, so I wrote down what he wore every day (blue oxford shirt, white oxford shirt, khaki pants, blue jacket, etc). I have a maniacal compunction to Write Things Down and keep records of my experiences. This is like an insurance policy, for what I'm not sure. I think of it as a way to access your internal state because you'll never know when you might need/want to do this. I'm forever on some kind of amorphous quest for Greater Awareness which I can't quite define but would like to think I can sense when I'm walking in that direction. I live in a 350-square-foot apartment with my two kids (ages 10 and 7), two cats, a rabbit, two fish, and close to 70 plants. My writing has been published by bewilderingstories.com/ issue785, spiritofchange.org, purpleclover.com, and life.ca.

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**SOME NIGHTS THE
RAIN FALLS HARDER
THAN OTHERS.**





IMAGE BY REZA SHAYESTEHPUR

A DROP HIT THE SCHOOL THE OTHER DAY.

HEAVY RAINS OVER THE TIRED EAST
BY MONTE BOURJAILY

The bombs fell like rain from the overcast sky above the Eastern Ukrainian border town of Ustalinsk rattling, shaking the streets, buildings, and people.

An old man sat on the front patio of a cafe sipping tea, the cafe sign hanging from a single hook, pockmarked by shrapnel and stray bullets. The place was empty. There was no food in the cooler at the counter, or on the shelves above, only tea, and tableware, some of the cups and plates cracked or broken. A few waiters still remained, standing, sitting, cleaning, smoking, waiting for time to pass and the rain to stop.

The man's tired eyes drifted through the thick lenses of his rectangular glasses from the sky to the street before him, to the buildings around him, gray and sagging.

Another old man came walking down the street, short and stout in an ill-fitting black suit and trench coat and a black fedora atop his gray head of hair, all gathered beneath an old black umbrella. The man at the cafe leaned over and adjusted his glasses to get a closer look.

"Ivan Afonasyavich?" he called out.

Ivan Afonasyavich stopped and turned, adjusting his own glasses to get a look at who had called. "Dmitri Igorovich, how are you?"

"Well, well," replied Dmitri Igorovich delightedly, standing up.

Ivan Afonasyavich closed his umbrella and hung it on his arm as both men made their way towards one another, and embraced.

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“What brings you out on a day like this?” Dmitri Igorovich asked.

“Oh, Andrei Ilyich died last night,” said Ivan Afonasyavich, crossing himself. “The whole building came down. A memorial was set up earlier this morning with candles and flowers, so I was headed over to pay my respects.”

“Ah yes I heard, a sad thing,” Dmitri Igorovich said, gently resting a hand on Ivan Afonasyavich’s shoulder. “Some nights the rain falls harder than others. Come sit with me. Join me for some tea until the rain passes.”

Ivan Afonasyavich looked at the sky and frowned. “It has been days now, and I fear we may never see the sun again. But it is better to sit and talk with an old friend over hot tea, than alone and cold, out in the rain.”

“Excellent, I will call for more tea,” Dmitri Igorovich said with a soft smile on his wrinkled face.

Ivan Afonasyavich sat carefully, leaning his umbrella against the back of the seat, and placing his worn hat on the table, while Dmitri Igorovich waved at the three waiters huddled around the cash register.

The blue gray tile of the patio was cracked and shattered in most places, revealing the cold, bland concrete beneath. A dud mortar had embedded itself beneath a table, now a pile of wood, between two chairs laying on their sides.

A waiter came over, he too an old man. The other two waiters were young, around 16 or 17, since most of the fighting age men had left for the front lines, and most families with children had either fled across the border or to the main cities, Donetsk or Luhansk.

“Might you have anything to eat?” Asked Ivan Afonasyavich.

“Not for three days,” said the waiter, a tall pot bellied man, frowning tiredly, his eyes heavy with melancholy.

“Then just tea should be fine.”

“Two please,” added Dmitri Igorovich.

The old waiter nodded and made his way back into the cafe with Dmitri Igorovich’s empty cup.

“A drop hit the school the other day,” said Ivan Afonasyavich, breaking a brief silence.

“Yes I know. It shook my whole apartment.” Dmitri Igorovich laughed.

ARE WE NOT STILL THE OBSERVERS?

Ivan Afonasyavich laughed as well. “The schoolchildren were running through the streets cheering and shouting.”

“Unfortunately for them though, I hear that they are setting up a temporary school in the bomb shelter near the old coal mine,” replied Dmitri Igorovich, wiping his forehead with an old handkerchief, as his laughter softened. “Do you think it fazes them?”

“What?” asked Ivan Afonasyavich, breaking from a memory.

“The weather,” said Dmitri Igorovich dryly.

“Does it faze us?” asked Ivan Afonasyavich, cleaning his glasses on his coat.

“It did once,” said Dmitri Igorovich.

Ivan Afonasyavich paused to ponder. “That was long ago comrade, a different time, a different war.”

Dmitri Igorovich blinked, staring at the empty street. “Different, how?” He sat up and looked at Ivan Afonasyavich. “Do you remember when we were children how after school we would run through Lenin Square to Gorky Park and watch the old men play

chess? So calm, patient, and severe as they carefully plotted their every move. Then the real pawns came in with their shining metal knights, rooks, and bishops, and their king shouting words of rage and entitlement from a podium as they burned their way across the board.”

“But then,” Ivan Afonasyavich replied smoothly, “the pieces on either side of the board had their own colors. It was black versus white. Now it would seem that the opponents are nearly indiscernible.”

“Still, don’t the goals stay the same, and are we not still the observers?” inquired Dmitri Igorovich, from deep in his thoughts.

“Goal is a vague word, my friend,” said Ivan Afonasyavich. “Its meaning varies from person to person. Some goals are clear, others are not, and sometimes one may conceal another. The goal shared with the public may be different from the true goal of the individual, and occasionally even the pawns may have goals of their own.”

Dmitri Igorovich sighed, resting his head in his hands, wrinkling his jowels as he rubbed his temples. “The motives of men is a confusing topic.”

“And that is precisely why I am tired,” replied Ivan Afonasyavich, crossing his legs and sitting back in his chair.

The old waiter returned with two cups of tea and set them gently on the table.

“Would you happen to have any sugar?” asked Ivan Afonasyavich politely.

“Ivan Afonasyavich, I’ve always known you as a man to take his tea black,” Dmitri Igorovich interrupted playfully.

“Need everything in life be so bitter?” Ivan Afonasyavich smiled.

The old waiter simply frowned and shook his balding head.

“That’s fine. Thank you very much,” Ivan Afonasyavich said.

The old waiter left and Ivan Afonasyavich took a sip of the tea. “I can’t remember the last time that I actually sat in a cafe. Russian tea?”

“The very same,” Dmitri Igorovich smiled, taking a sip from his own cup. “Black Russian tea and black Russian bread, the only two things in good supply. Who knows when the next supply truck from Kiev will come.”

BUT IF THERE WAS NO MALICE THEN WHY LET THE GAME END IN DEATH?

They both smiled at each other and then gazed at their surroundings, sipping tea. A little ways down the street a drop splashed on the asphalt, shaking the cafe and the table at which the old men were seated, leaving a crater like a permanent ripple in the puddle of the road. The old men simply looked over calmly and continued sipping their tea.

“Do you remember that one game of chess between Fyodor Petrovich and Anatoly Ivanovich?” Ivan Afonasyavich asked, reviving the conversation.

“How could I forget?” replied Dmitri Igorovich, laughing between sips of tea. “The game lasted for days, and they were living off of salo, cigarettes, and tea.”

“Yes,” said Ivan Afonasyavich laughing as well, and wiping a tear from his eye. “Nobody came back after the second day, by the end of which they had reached a stalemate, but neither one wanted to give in so they spent the rest of the time chasing each other around the board with their kings.”

They both laughed until they sighed.

“Whoever did win that match?” asked Dmitri Igorovich.

“Neither actually, I believe,” said Ivan Afonasyavich, looking over at his friend. “If I remember correctly both had heart attacks and died on the fourth day, their kings laying on their sides in the middle of the board.”

Dmitri Igorovich looked down at his shoes, scuffed brown loafers. “They were both strong, proud men, veterans of the revolution, comrades. There was no malice in their battle, but pride did in the both of them.”

They both turned their gaze to the street and sat in silence.

“But if there was no malice then why let the game end in death?” inquired Dmitri Igorovich.

“Well it would seem that we have already answered that question. Glory and pride. Where personal gain is the basis of goals there is no room for compromise, nor consideration for the long term, or the wellbeing of others. Eventually only time arises victorious. Players and pawns alike grow old and tired, and then they die.”

Ivan Afonasyavich checked his watch and took a last sip of tea. He then rose from his seat, and turned to his friend, smiling softly. “Well comrade, it has been refreshing to sit and chat. It is unfortunate that we have not done this more often. My wife and I should have you and Marina Nikolavna over for dinner some time.”

“And I should do the same for you,” replied Dmitri Igorovich standing and embracing his comrade. “How is Anna Pavelna?”

“Very well, and I am sure she would be happy to see you again. I will stop by your house later this week with an invitation. Tell Marina Nikolavna I said hi.” Ivan Afonasyavich put on his hat and lifted his umbrella.

“Take care old friend.” Dmitri Igorovich said, again smiling.

Ivan Afonasyavich walked back to the street, opened his umbrella. A drop splashed.





MONTE BOURJAILY

Since the Maidan revolution of 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has been stuck in a seemingly endless conflict against itself and Russia. Due to the lack of news coverage in recent years few people outside of Europe seem to know about it, and out of those few even fewer understand the complexity of it. For centuries the borders of Eastern Europe have been constantly changing, and before the fall of the USSR countries like Belarus and Ukraine never existed as independent nations. Eastern Europe's ethnic majority is slavic, and many Eastern Europeans see this as a strong bond between the nations of the region. In fact Putin's primary justifications for his actions are based on the idea of a unified slavic state (though in reality he just wants to be the man known for the restoration of the pre-Soviet, great Russian empire). Many of the affected people are not opposed to the idea of slavic unification, but they are opposed to rule by Russia and the conflict that this recurring push brings. The conflict is not only complex from a political and human rights perspective, but also an emotional one. All these people want is to be able to live safely and comfortably, and they are lost as to why their governments see the need to create enemies out of people who share a similar heritage and culture. Yet still the rain keeps falling.

I am 19 and currently studying Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University. Film is my primary artistic interest, and my short films, *Swallow*, and *A Perfect Day*, have won awards in festivals. However, writing comes a close second. I simply enjoy creating, and I try to create using whatever mediums I find I have some level of "skill" at. My written work has never before been published.

The pieces of art that I adore most are those that create concrete images of emotion, because language still fails to define human emotion clearly. We know what words like "sad" and "happy" mean to us, because we feel and experience them within ourselves, but we have little idea as to what "sadness" or "happiness" might look or feel like for another person.

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UNTIL DE
TEAR US A

BT
PART

IMAGE BY ALICE PASQUAL

NO MONEY SO WHAT?
WE'RE A BANK SO
ANYTHING NOT MONEY SO
WHAT?

SHAKING AND SHAKING AND
SHAKING DOWN MY HEAD
BY JIM MEIROSE

Captain, please, I said
shaking down my head.

Hey, oh, stop, you're losing
me pal—hold up I can't
follow, hold it—eh.

Oh, snap! I'se just funnin'.
That's kind of a taste—you

know—a little crumb—of the fix you'd be
in if I really gave a shit about everything
in this whirl round the narrow line straight
down the middle my big boss someplace
said to follow—well maybe not always
following maybe once in a while out front
swinging the big machete everybody sent
up to hike point in this kind of a guerrilla
operation all covert you know gets
handed out to. I bet you didn't know none
of this pap but it's true. This is all God-
damned covert. Every step we've done,
and every step still to do. Like—why you
think those two yahoos up there who've
been watching every day were sent here?
Because everything we're charged with
doing is covert. It doesn't fit.

No money so what. We're a bank so
anything not money so what. We're a bank
money what but no money so what. So
what you see them?

If you feel that way about it why push
ahead into it so?

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Because; as I am sure you know yourself. Because you feel the same about what you're tasked to do. When the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do. Like that. All Percy; you know when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do. Like this. All Faith; you know when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do. As told. No less, no more. Exactly as told. Immediately too. The boss means business. So, do.

So what, they that there. Talk and talk and so what how when or who? Huck.

Captain please Captain please, I said shaking and shaking down my head—no matter if your bossed 'round at beetle-borers, Barr's bar-rackets, Super Deathwatch Weevil-strips, or Longhorn's wasp storage shelving's where you're at, when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

God! That's so purely fat dick! Hey; no matter it's Glass-fishing-custom-sculptures, Chemical Men's hot bathing supermixers, Pappy's decorative twigging with stained-sheet fade superingredient firm, or Monroe's topwheel slickcladding company, they ought to do for you. When the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

—no this is it Dave don't waste time because we're a bank and no money waste time no money so what money so no money so what—like, So what if it's Mr. Termite's wharf-weathering furniture glaze corporation; Homer's house balancer-builders, Anobiidae cypress planking planning, Mister Asian's strained citrus ooze installers. When the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

Captain please Captain please, I said shaking and shaking and shaking down my head and my head and but but but but eh—for Christ's sake, you know that even if you happen to work in sweat shops like Acid-fishing Hennie's twig borer killer work, Mann's general purpose statue-bath beer company, Buster's beetling-organ instantly fastcures, or Carpenterworm's simplified powderpost's fast chemical bladeless dismemberment processing shoppe. When the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

Wait! Stop. This endlessly flowed out the Captain? Our Captain?

MY CAPTAIN? BANK NO
MONEY? MONEY SO?
SO WHAT?

No, your Captain can't be my Captain because your Captain all yes what sure fine—if here or there or anywhere like at Wood's piping sculptor's stained glazing vessel borers or at Bath's Olde World Carpenterworm spraypainting or at Taleho's weathering beetlebutt-treatment-acid glaze superplant. When the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

No, no! Your Captain's some hippo, some sweet-ass con hippo, but my Captain no money so what. My Captain-Bank no money-money so-so what. Sure, who do they think they are—are they Anobiidae Ants' paint any car any color, inc.; Macro's soggy wood restorers; Boore's roofing service; False-termites' tennis chemical stain works; or Organ-sinkers-home-treatment-natural-acid-bars be damned, but—no matter who or where, my sweetheart—when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

What? Eh so what? No. The blind eye, it was then?

Sure. The bottomed-out splat of this whole ride was, So. What law's being broken? That is important. If a law's being broken, Captain my sweet, contact local law enforcement. Not us. That's 'cause even if we're someplace dead like Carpenter's professional grade woody-backed-borer-weevil rags works; Anobiidae storage-bugs; Old Molding's new-wave tennis deathwatchers; or Asian borer's iron-steel-and-wood-all-purpose heavy bull drivers. To wit; when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

We're just a bank. We are not responsible for any of our land. The appropriate legal documents are on file. As are Mourning Glory's simplified flue borers and glass racket international clubbe. As are HavanaBoy's deathwatch-girdlers' supply; and Plain no-name decorative molding citrus-rub Inc. Ah, fo' sweet, shaking-down-shaking-down-and shaking down, my head—when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

Over and again he said they threw up before him, The appropriate test cases have been run. Push comes to shove the funds are in place for contingencies re our lands. Each time asked that answer was given. Like we were somehow actually able to Acid-seed any car, any color; have the skills to work at Bark-girdler's Fishing House Furniture Factory; Possess the requisite array of hard-earned sheepskins to deserve a position at Papp's razor-sharp pull-stripping rollouts; To throw plug at Bath the racket ship shoppe; Not to mention at the headquarters of Go Naval! But—when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

Shprunk, huh huh dat skunk's purely cop-out.

Yes! Contingencies re our lands brute pop contingencies re. They said our lands. Brute. Pop. No money. Brute. Contingencies re our lands. They said they said, we mean—do they think we're simple pluggerboys at some Cheroot Brothers' stained sheets balancing bars cranial warehouse? Or that we dig out big through some assorted bostrichidae cedar wasp cleanup's rubble? Like their big pants stand daily at Tennis house cladding wood supershowroom, or at Old-wharf's powderpost crumbleshack? Eyy, they think that? Do they think that? Hah, they do—because of the big fat fun truth, that when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

Then they said it. It. It sounded like, No care. But if forced to.

My God. Okay I'm in it firm now. Huh.

The nerve!

I know!

HUH? IS ALL THEY KNOW IS WHAT MATTERS IS THAT CONTINGENCY FUNDING'S IN PLACE?

They tried to throw down as proof then, long slappy-looped lengths of thin liner piping; ten dog-eared copies of the rulebook of the National bureau of common weights and statues; Anne Anobiidae's Bosom nineteen ninety-five heavy-duty diving suit catalog, the go-place for strong weights, roofing sinkers, and ultralight tubing. And they claimed that if they gave the Captain his way, a heavy infestation of longhorned-but-otherwise-common-microlarvae weevils fitted with dread wooden dreddy-dread wheelie super dreaddest of all, pure pine wood moldings, would be unleashed! They did not appear to subscribe to the notion that when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

I know! Huh! Is all they know is what matters is that contingency funding's in place? That's really their bottom? That we're a bank after all, No money so what? In that case you're worth this word flow right here going off down right, off down back, and off down left, and over down front. You know—hey hell; sounds like they're stuck back when sizzling rainbow bathpowders and chemical peels

were the thing? Back when Chemical's superloud sheets-o'-cladding brackets could be got without a Monsignor's signoff or day trippy sneakdown to Mexico? Or when B-Buddy's special deathwatch organ-sinkweights borne in public drew not a stare? Hey heck. H-h-h-h-heck! No wonder they are batblind to the fat rule that when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

We never showed you this nope, but; look, it's all spread out down there. We're a bank after all. What you want?

Uh. Huh. Summa big Pansie.

My God! Big Pansie? The Captain played Big Pansie on them, eh? So, how'd this fun wrap down in the end? Down to B-bugs boring for larvae board level or Beetle-bugged glassy-eyed-sheet-statue-moldings level or Weathering's decorative-acid-based-chemical-organcoat-applicator level or, hey hey hey hey, fat Vessel-liners including the optional, rarely seen, and when seen mostly improperly installed, Beetle-dee subterranean bark false carpenter-weights? Mon Dieu, no wonder they're blind to the truth that Kiam la estro venkos vian kapon, vi faros.

Damned straight! He spat me with we never showed you but look, we mean, it so happens well, that last time we looked it may have been there but; push comes to shove, the funds are in place for contingencies re our lands is at bottom.

So. Deck we're dealt.

Yup. Push to the are place contingencies our. So. Go figure.

Yup, so. Eh. Deck we been dealt.

Sigh. Back to the Main street Asian house deathwatch wheel-sinker routine. Maybe even far as to Clad furniture stripper-moths, Strained-out-acidhead's-super-black widow parlors, HessieAnne Bostrichidae's new-breed seed-bee farms, like that; where there can be no doubt that when the boss comes touchin' up you head, you do.

The Captain finally claimed before letting me go that they said, Yah sho' cap't off like, Eh, Mister Small, what you need to call off your bark? Eh, Mister Small, and the others all back you, sure, that whole pack. What you need?

Oh shit. Okay. Then it's for sure. The whole wall's dead-ended. He did his best but I guess for us all it will be falling back on making Glazed-tennis-ball-acid-bath impervious ceramic deeptubs, Anobiidae weight treatment sheets, glass termite moth and glazing bee zipsmashing powder, and Lake Superior's-quickdrying rash-wax. Eh?

Yep. Deck we been dealt. And that's that.

Yep. Yep. Cigarette?

Sure. I do believe that once again the boss has come touchin' up our heads. Do you?

Asian chemical sinkers and decorative chemical carpenterworms—

I do.

—plus all-band tube type termite-statues, re: drywood bostrichidae, only.

Okay.

<hum>

<hum>

So, Dave.

Hey boss?

What now?





JIM MEIROSE

I'm finding that every blank page I sit down at to write into turns out to be not blank at all, but actually quite full. It contains every possible story on every possible topic in every possible place or time I can possibly write in on or about. It may sound odd but writing for me is not so much about laying words on the page as it is removing blank spaces. It is starting to seem to me that my relationship between the blank page, the final text written, and the act of "writing" are quite like what Michelangelo felt his was to his art, as expressed in his quote, "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." This applies directly to how I feel about my writing now that I've so many years behind me with so many years to go (I hope), "The desired text is already complete within the blankness spread over the page, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to clear away the superfluous emptiness concealing it."

My writing has been published in South Carolina Review, Xavier Review, Phoebe, Baltimore Review, New Orleans Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, American Literary Review, 34thParallel, 14 Hills, Witness, Journal of Experimental Fiction, Le Scat Noir.

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PUT ME IN A BOX AND PACK
ME UP TIGHT. TELL ME WHO
I AM SUPPOSED TO BE. IT'S
EASIER THAT WAY.

THAT GRAY AREA
BY ANNA SVOBODA

POP OF COLOR
ON THE LIPS.
QUICK WAY
TO LOOK PUT
TOGETHER!
MAGAZINES
SAY.

When I get out from the shower and wring my hair until it's a tight tube, a conduit for sapping the leftover water, twizzled like licorice. It's the same shape that the kitchen towels take, warm from the dryer, when he lifts them from the basket, twists them, and snaps them at me. My skin stings, the butt of the joke. Cherry chapstick, sticky freezer pop residue on chubby cheeks. It's red dye 40, it's processed foods, it's fruit loops. It's all of the smells that laced my youth, all of the things I don't eat now.

Swedish fish. Stretch the head off until it breaks. It strains like the pull and release of winning the battle with a clothing tag, using hands over scissors or teeth. The tough-putty consistency of my arm when it falls asleep, floppy but firm, bone beneath skin. It sounds like my uncle when he put his finger in his left cheek and popped it out. Like a whoosh of air from a Pringles can. Once you pop, you can't stop.

Pop of color on the lips. "Quick way to look put together!" the magazines say. I opt for lipstick over heels. Because better than a stiletto, lipstick gives you heightened confidence, feminine mystique.

Helps me not to look 13. Masks my insecurities. Bright, ruby, blood, rust. Lipstick once beloved by harlots harnessed by the mainstream. In makeup we trust.

Red door to East 16th. We live in a tiny one-bedroom in the back of the building, but our address stands out on our street. We took our engagement photos in front of this door and I wore matching Dorothy shoes. Coincidence our wedding venue has a red door too? Doorways are the mouths to buildings, and I think they can always use a pop of color. Welcome or a warning, it makes you want to walk on through.

Knock knock. Orange you glad I didn't say banana? I'll save you the back and forth. More than red to me, this color is a warning. It says I'm here. I'm here. In a hotel-hostel in Germany. Working, watching workers like tiny dots of confetti against Berlin's backdrop, dusty slate, a chalk-covered blackboard when the teacher wiped her words away but they're not quite gone. Particles of each participle remain hanging in the air, clinging to the board, begging to be heard.

These workers are on mustard platforms, safely gridlocked in excel sheet scaffolding. Did they learn how to diagram a sentence, too, to end up hanging like a modifier, protected by a harness and a wire? How did I get here? All I wanted to ever do was write, and instead I help brands advertise.

Orange cones below me block piles of dirt, Tonka trucks shoveling mulch. Or it could be anything, really. It's brown and nondescript. Muddy like my thoughts and these sentences. A giant Mercedes Benz logo laughs from up high. It's like the North Star, but in East Berlin, and Lady Gaga will be there next week. Not a baby boy in a manger, not exactly. It's 8.25am. Did you know your sons would become truck men? Did these little boys dream of big tanks while drinking orange crush and crushing on girls with orange hair?

I used Sun-In once. I sprayed my dark roots until they smelled of lemons and chemicals and I sat underneath a clementine orb that baked my virgin skin and soft hair, willing myself to change. The bottle was bright plantain. So I thought my hair would be the same. Instead it looked like pumpkin pulp dripping between

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clenched fists and felt like steel wool. I wore it confidently. Until a girl Sophia at school called it Orange. Orange is a dirty, dirty word as far as hair is concerned. And I heard she said worse, I heard she said that it looked like shit. I was too young. The word seared me like the sun. Like my hamster, it bit.

I crossed out her face in my yearbook with a giant Sharpie. I wanted to shave my head. But I wore the limp rusting remnants, pretending that I did this with intention.

I got my Heaven's Gate shade of white-yellow hair in college. We all went to the same stylist in my sorority and I reached peak bleachness in the living room of a man named Trey. My dark eyebrows, even when I plucked them to smithereens, always gave me away. But this was Florida in 2004 and I noticed early that when you were brighter, lighter, more heads turned and more people wanted to know your name. I followed the pack like a yellow-bellied sapsucker.

Yellow roses on the dining room table; it's three days after Valentine's Day. I hate roses, but the happy color makes them okay. Yellow is versatile, both pleasant and sallow. It's the chosen color to highlight, aggressive like an arrow, halo-ing words in works and important things. But it's also the color of jaundice and decay and infections and smokers' teeth. There's a spectrum for everything I guess.

When we got our Upper East Side apartment, we each had important things. Not to say, I didn't want what he wanted but our non-negotiables were ordered differently. Mine: character, primarily. His: high ceilings and light. I don't know why, but sunlight wasn't that important to me. You could always paint your walls yellow, I thought.

The bathroom was a light mustard, the shade of dehydrated pee. The original intention was to match the walls to a framed Mark Rothko print I found on the street in a trash heap. It looked like a seventies-inspired sunset to me. The glass was cracked in the top right corner, and I didn't care, it gave it character. A dried-blood red smear on the top, with a black line

separating the mouth-puckering orange midsection, and at the bottom, a thin layer of Dijon. It has a yellow frame that is so unassuming I don't notice it until I stare. And that's how I think of yellow. Unless it's branded by Nike and the screaming shade of "I'm-here-don't-hit-me" dry-wick material of my favorite running pullover, it's not really there.

For the solar eclipse this year, we were at The Greenbriar in West Virginia. It's an ornate, creepy, docked-cruise-ship of a resort surrounded by a disintegrating economy. Everyone walking around was a sheltered shade of white in navy blazers with brass buttons or boasting bottle-blond bouffants as if we were in the 1960s. It's a time capsule of wealth and floral wallpaper and drawing rooms and horseback riding. This was the halfway mark en route back to NYC from a wedding in North Carolina, and the pictures were pretty, so we booked a one-night stay. From our lawn chairs overlooking an infinity pool and the mountaintops, we saw the moon go in front of the sun. A sci-fi-chilled stillness enveloped us and I begged the sun to come out again while looking through my borrowed paper glasses oohing and ahing at the bright fingernail I saw. Come back yellow sun. I didn't know what I had until it was gone.

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Green isn't the color of envy; it's the color of mistrust. It's also my favorite in the crayon box. The color of urgency, verdancy, earthly lust. Green is plants, if I could keep them alive. But in my dusty apartment, only the brown brittle bones survive. My favorite shade is mossy and putrid. It's so ugly it's beautiful. It's briny and sour, extra dirty please. The body can make it. It looks like disease.

I grew up an Air Force brat in Germany and there was an alleyway behind the houses; our fences didn't touch each other, not like in America where you're rubbing up against your neighbor. In the in-between there was a giant overgrown springy mattress of moss with just enough give, like the water-filled beds where my rich aunt and uncle would lay their heads.

Headed downtown on the 6 train while reading about a Mrs Olive Green in a short story by Alice Munro. Olive married into the last name Green. She didn't realize how silly it would sound. We do a lot for love. I would do less. My Whole Earth sweetener pack is green, the uniform symbolism for "natural" or "eco". I'm drinking Argo tea. They want to be Starbucks,

they can't fool me. The plasticness of the lid and all of this sickens me. Did I mention I'm trying to be green in 2019? Today I started singing to myself while making my bed. I had just packed my green goo of curried lentil lunch into a plastic takeout container that I would throw away. I sang, "You are eco, you are frugal. You are eco, you are frugal." Realizing that I couldn't even fool myself in the shrouded gray light of morning, the refrain shifted, grew biting, brittle, like stalks of grass after a summer's day of sun.

"You are eco, you are frugal. You are egotistical and you are foolish. You are egotistical and you are foolish. You are evil and you are futile. You are evil and you are futile." Of course I don't believe this. Not completely. But the refrain continues without me.

Indigo. Girls. Indigo. Inigo. Montoya. I only know indigo by name, but what I think of is black so black it's blue, like the sheen on the hair of Archie Comic character Veronica or a puddle of fresh tar under moonlight. When I search the word under the Google image option, the circuit gets confused. Is it purple, is it cool? Jewel tones

that my grandmother preferred, stark and cold against her cropped raven hair and light skin. It's pain. That cold to the point of hot. When it sneaks up on you and then you're back into a temperate reality and you're itching and burning and realizing that Mother Nature is an ice queen and she could get you too. Blue is calming but is that because we're slowly shutting down, preparing ourselves for eternity underground?

Grandmother Blanton left us on a frozen New Year's Day in 2005. I remember it in cool blue. She was born at Christmas and her name was Carol. I sang "On Eagle's Wings" at her funeral. She told me I had to. I hadn't enough time to prepare. She was given weeks to live when they finally figured out what she was "complaining" about. Complaining in quotes, because she didn't. She was strong. But even the strong can fall victim and when that happens, all that's left is searing cerulean. Blue is saying, "It's too cold" when it's 35 degrees and, "That's why my eyes are outputting these streams," it's because of the weather—not because my mother's mother's doctors didn't know better.

The band Jack's Mannequin sings a song called Bruised. Every inch of me is bruised. You can easily replace any mention of this word, with blue.

GRAY. GRAY
AURA. GRAY
AREA. MAKES
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MORE.

I met with a wellness coach. By “met” I mean I lay on my back on my bed, the most expensive thing I owned in my decrepit studio while I tried to understand and communicate into a cell phone who I wanted to be. I said a “better person”. This phrase now nauseates me. She had me close my eyes and imagine a force field of light surrounding me. She asked me what color I saw. I said a light purple. I don’t know if I made that up, but I doubt it because I don’t like the color particularly. She questioned me. Violet? She prodded. Yes, I replied. It wasn’t bright, rather paler. Gray. Gray aura. Gray area. Makes sense. I’m in this middle stage and I don’t know who I am any more.

A violet aura means you’re hyper aware and remarkably intelligent. I don’t know if I looked this up later or she actually said this. But more labels I thought. I reject them and am drawn to them simultaneously. Put me in a box and pack me up tight, tell me who I am supposed to be. It’s easier that way. Tie the ribbon tighter and tighter. I’m not strangled by my thoughts if I can’t breathe or if I’m distracted by pretty things. Give me a lane, say I have to stay there or else. So I’m

not swerving down Rainbow Road in Mario Kart. I always fell over the edge.

Purple is regal, firstborn, while violet is requesting a permission to go deeper. It's wishing for a bright future, but only awakening to a gray morning. Opening eyes to an overcast sky and saying "today will be different" but knowing it probably won't be. It's taking one foot in front of another, of being afraid of the subway stairs yet going down them every day. I always think: one wrong step and I could die.

I feel most alive when I'm running in the rain with a perfect song blasting in my earbuds. Most recently, this past Saturday, it was Car Seat Headrest's latest album and the song "Bodys" that is a combo of a swaggering Julian Casablancas solo-act laced with the frenetic energy of Scottish rock band Frightened Rabbit. At 3:07, lead singer Will Toledo speaks to us as an aside, as if sharing a joke to the backstage crew. "Well, so what? So what? / We're young / We're thin (most of us) We're alive (most of us)." Desperate guitar riffs overlay a beat that's so urgent you'd think

it was six feet under, the vocals are muffled and synthesized as if covered by layers of soil: "Don't you realize our bodies could fall apart any second?" My tears mixed with sweat with rain blurring the seams of what is what. Endorphins. Suspension. This in between.

I had to start wearing a mouth guard this year. My jaw becomes a gate in the night, attempting to be prehistorically protective, gnawing the life out of thoughts and backfiring like a boomerang, disintegrating the strongest parts of me. Dust to dust we all will be. I am going mouth-first; God so help me.





ANNA SVOBODA

My writing is fueled by anxiety, caffeine, and lo-fi beats. It happens in pockets of time, mainly in my iPhone notes while I'm walking or waiting for a train.

My to do lists act as a salve. (Because constant strategizing means you don't have to take action.) Music makes me believe in God. Running clears my head. A glass or three of Malbec does too, for the moment, until I wake up the next day, pinned down by spiraling thoughts.

Writing is like a charismatic moody lover that simultaneously lifts me up and lets me down. I can't get enough.

I started writing when I was in first grade. I used a long thin piece of paper meant for a basket-weaving craft project. I remember it being red but I don't trust my memory. I folded it back and forth against itself like a fan, secured it with a single staple on one side and filled the tiny one-inch pages with the adventures of a ladybug named Legg. In third grade, I wrote my first nonfiction story, *The Moving Family*, based on my experience as an Air Force Brat living in Germany.

I graduated from University of Florida's Journalism School in 2008 with a degree in Public Relations and moved to New York City and wrote, but only as a hobby. I interviewed artists and reviewed songs for music website Earmilk and curated a monthly playlist feature called *The Indie Skim*. Prior to that I penned a column on "the quarter-life crisis" for *Stay Thirsty Media* and was an entertainment writer for *ZINK* magazine.

When I decided I wanted to write, I decided I wanted to do it right, and needed the hypothetical gun-to-my-head to actually carve out the time. Spending thousands of dollars on school turned out to be a pretty threatening weapon. I started my MFA in Creative Nonfiction with the New School in New York City while working full-time in advertising. And at some point, I tapped into the power of persuasion for my own personal use and morphed my love of pithy prose into a career as a copywriter. Before moving to London this past fall, I lived in New York City for 10-plus years.

I had to scour for moments to write. I found them hiding: in the delicious sun-streaked silent hours of early morning, while waiting on a subway platform, or waiting for a friend at dinner, and when I'd miraculously have 10 precious minutes between meetings.

My story is about the in-between. When a kaleidoscope world turns grayscale, and the past and future collide in a suspended convergence of complacency. The depressing, statistical fact that nearly half of my life is behind me and although I can course-correct, I can't change my trajectory. Not truly. For example, I probably won't be an investment banker or an actress. It doesn't matter if I want either, neither, or both of these things. It's a matter of simple math and lack of time. I'm on the path I'm on.

Speaking of paths, I'm in danger of you running me over with your car as I type, because I write while I walk. I'm a walk-writer. Which is really just a euphemism for jaywalker. I like to write what moves me, and typically me moving helps the overall movement of my thoughts. Like when pregnant women take a lap around the

block to get things going. Or so I've heard. And at this stage in my life, my words are my babies in need of constant coddling and attention. So when they cry out, I pick them up and swaddle them safely in my Notes app. I know it isn't the traditional, seductive literary way, but right now, this is what works for me.

And like with *That Gray Area*, which is a color study about the murky and mundane, I believe, it's in the seemingly insignificant in-between moments that life happens. It's when I overhear conversations that I would never be invited to, that I have a front row seat to humanity or hatred, that I am in the world and my eyes are open even if my thumbs are tap-tap-tapping and an older gentleman in the Tube station raises his fist in my direction shouting, "Watch where you're going!" Even that. There's a story there.

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Images by Chellise Michael.

